

The Journey of Establishing the Law Library for Bhutan’s First Law School

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Abstract

Established in 2015 by Royal Charter, the Jigme Singye Wangchuck School of Law (JSW Law) opened to students in 2017 and is Bhutan’s only law school. This article describes the author’s journey in establishing JSW Law’s library. From earning an MLIS to finalizing construction plans and purchasing materials, the author’s journey was complex and challenging. However, the JSW Law Library is now open and provides faculty and students with a modern space for research and study.

Keywords: Bhutan, JSW Law, JSW Law Library, law libraries, collection development

INTRODUCTION

Bhutan!¹ A small thriving nation sandwiched between India to the south and China to the north, Bhutan is known for its realistic philosophical center for Gross National Happiness. Further, Bhutan is one of the only countries in the world that has invested heavily in blockchain and is currently establishing one of the greatest cities, called the Gelephu Mindfulness City, a special administrative zone.² As Bhutan moves forward as a vibrant and modern democracy,³ the rule of law plays an ever-increasing and significant role. His Majesty the King, Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck, has emphasized that to create a just and content society, we must set strong standards of the rule of law. Legal education is the foundation and an indispensable and vital component of such a society. Therefore, His Majesty the King established Bhutan’s first law school by promulgating the Royal Charter on the auspicious day of February 21, 2015.

Bhutan embarked on this ambitious journey to establish its first law school, the JSW School of Law (JSW Law), which would not only serve as the foundation for legal education but would also act as a center for research and discourse on Bhutanese law. The establishment of a law library is a critical step in the founding of a law school, serving as the backbone of legal research, academic learning, and professional training.⁴ The creation of a new law library is a complex endeavor that involves navigating financial, logistical, and institutional hurdles.

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Editor’s Note: I met Ugyen at the 2024 American Association of Law Libraries (AALL) annual meeting in Chicago. He had received the FCIL-SIS’s Schaffer Grant for Foreign Librarians to attend the conference. He gave a fascinating lecture on his experience creating Bhutan’s first law library, so I asked him if he could write an article about that experience for publication in the IJLI. He kindly agreed.

¹ National Statistics Bureau, “Bhutan at a glance,” accessed Nov. 15, 2024, https://www.nsb.gov.bt/wp-content/uploads/dlm_uploads/2023/10/Bhutan-At-a-Glance.

² Gelephu Mindfulness City, “About us,” accessed Nov. 15, 2024, <https://gmc.bt/about-us/>.

³ The Constitution of Bhutan was enacted on July 18, 2008, and marks the country’s transition from a monarchy to a democratic constitutional monarchy.

⁴ M. Childs and S. Sexton, “Starting a new law school library: Successes and challenges,” *Legal Information Management* 11, no. 3 (2011): 191–97.

Entrusted with the responsibility of establishing the law library from scratch, I faced the daunting task of creating a resource center that would support legal education, faculty research, and the future practice of law in Bhutan. Having no formal academic background in library studies, my journey to build the JSW Law Library was marked by challenges, learning opportunities, and a wealth of valuable experiences.

This article addresses the critical aspects of establishing a law library, particularly in a resource-limited context, and discusses effective strategies and lessons learned from my experience establishing the JSW Law Library.

THE CHALLENGE OF BUILDING A LAW LIBRARY FROM SCRATCH

First and foremost, realizing the need for specialized knowledge in library education, I pursued a Master of Library and Information Science (MLIS) at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro (UNCG). During my two years there, I immersed myself in library studies, developing skills and insights that would prove invaluable upon my return to Bhutan. Yet, when I arrived back home, the task was still daunting, as the law library was to be built from scratch without detailed guidelines or systems in place. The law school, at that time, was called the Royal Institute of Law,⁵ since it was still a project.

RESOURCE CONSTRAINTS AND INITIAL STEPS

Despite completing my MLIS, I was still lost and was not aware of where to start. Fortunately, White & Case, a legal firm based in Washington, DC, offered a consultant law librarian for the project, Ms. Judy Stark, who became my mentor in establishing the law library. The Detailed Project Report (DPR)⁶ for the establishment of the Royal Institute of Law outlined general objectives for the school but did not provide specific details about the library's structure, policies, or required resources. The absence of guidelines meant that every decision, from which books to acquire to what systems to implement, had to be navigated without a clear direction. The American Bar Association (ABA) Standards for the accreditation of law schools was one foundational document I used to understand the establishment of the law library.⁷ Referring to ABA Standards provided some clues on what kind of materials to collect.⁸ One of the primary challenges in establishing a new law library is resource availability. Budgets for new institutions, particularly in developing countries, are often limited. These constraints affect the acquisition of legal texts, journals, databases, and necessary technological infrastructure.⁹ Additionally, legal publications and databases can be costly, making it difficult to procure comprehensive collections that meet academic and research needs.

Without a collection development policy or any other related policy, I relied on the DPR's¹⁰ outline to guide initial acquisitions and understand the law school's curriculum and programs offered. It was immediately apparent that we needed core texts in Bhutanese law and supplementary materials in international law, criminal law, family law, and constitutional law, among others. Drawing on the DPR's general recommendations and advice from colleagues on the Interim Academic Council (IAC), I began gathering materials that would be essential for the students' education and research. Yet, this approach was far from systematic and underscored the need for a comprehensive policy to guide collection development going forward.

CHALLENGES IN SELECTING RESOURCES AND NAVIGATING LEGAL DATABASES

Obtaining international legal resources, particularly physical materials, was one daunting task. I came to understand that it's almost impossible to buy any print legal resources in Bhutan since there is no market for them. Understanding the market, I explored alternative resources for the needs of the students and faculty. Digital resources were an alternative, and one of the most significant challenges was selecting electronic resources and navigating legal databases.

⁵ The Royal Institute of Law, "Master plan for the establishment of the Royal Institute of Law" (Oct. 23, 2013), 15.

⁶ Library, "Detail Project Report for the establishment of the Royal Institute of Law" (Feb. 6, 2014), 56–58.

⁷ See American Bar Association Standard 606.

⁸ See American Bar Association Standards 601(c) and 704.

⁹ A. Fitzgerald and S. Lee, "Library innovation in the digital age: A strategic framework for law school libraries," *Journal of Library Administration* 52, no. 1 (2013): 55–68.

¹⁰ Library, "Detail Project Report for the establishment of the Royal Institute of Law" (n 6).

Initially, I had no experience with legal databases and little guidance on which resources would be most beneficial. With the support and advice of mentors like Judy,¹¹ we began exploring databases and eventually subscribed to key resources like HeinOnline and later LexisNexis and Westlaw. These databases provided critical access to international legal scholarship and case law, enriching the library's offerings and aligning with the school's mission to foster a broad legal education. Furthermore, some open-source databases and fee-exempt databases like Research4life for developing countries added additional resources to the library.

The process of selecting resources, however, was complex. While I had learned the basics of library management at UNCG, I was still a novice when it came to understanding which resources would be most useful for a law school library. I began acquiring digital and physical copies of Bhutanese laws from the National Assembly of Bhutan¹² and the National Council of Bhutan,¹³ thus ensuring that students and faculty had access to both current and previous legislation passed by the Parliament of Bhutan. Understanding the importance of court judgments as primary resources for law school teaching and study, I was also aware that access to judicial opinions¹⁴ is actually quite limited on Bhutanese public platforms, even though Section 96(A) of the *Civil and Criminal Procedure Code (CCPC) (Amendment) Act 2011* of Bhutan¹⁵ states that the judgment of the Court shall be made accessible in the public domain, including libraries.

Expanding the collection beyond Bhutanese laws to include resources for foreign legal research, philosophy, comparative law, and Buddhist philosophy helped create a well-rounded collection that reflects Bhutan's unique cultural and legal landscape. But without the help of my colleagues traveling out of the country and our visiting faculties and international friends of the law school, who were able to sneak books into their suitcases, expanding the library's print collection wouldn't have been possible.

BUILDING INFRASTRUCTURE IN A TEMPORARY SETTING

Infrastructure poses another challenge, as law libraries require space for physical collections, study areas, and digital resources. In new law schools, facilities might be makeshift, with library spaces sharing functions with classrooms or administrative offices. Such settings restrict a library's capacity to house a broad range of resources and provide an environment conducive to study and research.¹⁶ Understanding the infrastructure requirements, the JSW Law Library began in a temporary office with only a few shelves to hold its initial collection. This setup, though modest, was essential for getting the library off the ground.

As I managed the development of physical resources, I was also heavily involved in the planning of the construction of the permanent library building. I participated in the design process, advising on space requirements, room sizes, and the layout of study areas. Decisions on everything from shelving placement to furniture dimensions had to be carefully considered to create an efficient and welcoming environment for future students and faculty. Visiting different law libraries when I was in the US for my MLIS studies sparked ideas despite my zero understanding and knowledge of engineering and architecture.

This simultaneous focus on temporary and permanent facilities required adaptability and a clear vision of how the library would eventually serve its users. While establishing a foundational collection, I balanced the needs of the current setup with the long-term vision of a fully operational law library that would be housed in a purpose-built facility.

HUMAN RESOURCES

A library's success hinges on knowledgeable and well-trained staff. Newly established law libraries often struggle to recruit skilled law librarians, especially if the field of library science is underdeveloped in the country.¹⁷

¹¹ Judy Stark is a consultant from the White & Case law firm based in Washington, DC.

¹² National Assembly of Bhutan, "Parliament Business, Act," accessed Nov. 14, 2024, <https://nab.gov.bt/page/acts>.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Judiciary of Bhutan, "Publications, judgments," accessed Nov. 14, 2024, <https://nationalcouncil.bt/page/acts>.

¹⁵ Section 96 (A), "Civil and Criminal Procedure Code (CCPC) (Amendment) Act 2011," which states that the judgment of the Court shall be made accessible in the public domain, including libraries.

¹⁶ P. Murray, "Creating collaborative spaces in law libraries: Challenges and solutions," *Legal Reference Services Quarterly* 37, no. 2 (2018): 75–91.

¹⁷ Childs and Sexton (n 4).

Additionally, the lack of in-house expertise for managing specialized legal resources and providing research guidance can hinder the library's ability to serve faculty and students effectively. In Bhutan, library-educated professionals are rarely seen, as the profession doesn't seem attractive and is not a highly desired profession. Therefore, finding and hiring librarians is almost impossible.¹⁸ Further, there are no librarians in Bhutan who have training in both law and library studies. By default, working to establish a law library, I claim to be a law librarian without formal legal education.

The reading culture in Bhutan faces challenges due to limited awareness of the broader role that libraries can play. This perspective, in turn, limits the public's potential to understand library education. Until I received my MLIS, I must admit that I was of the same mindset, but after receiving my MLIS, the door of library education opened for me, and I learned that it is a profession that involves and allows continuous learning.

Convincing the law school's administration about the need for a professional librarian was not easy. I can't blame them, as there is definitively a cultural stigmatization of libraries and librarians in Bhutan. There is just a small library in every Bhutanese school and a staff member who looks after basic library services. Further compounding the issue is the narrow range of services provided by library staff. In most school libraries, the primary functions are limited to issuing and receiving books, along with shelving duties.¹⁹ This basic structure contrasts sharply with modern libraries worldwide, where librarians serve as conduits to knowledge, assisting patrons with digital resources, research guidance, and information access.²⁰ This contrast is due to the lack of library-educated professionals in Bhutan.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR GROWTH AND INTERDISCIPLINARY LEARNING

Despite the challenges, establishing the law library presented opportunities for me to develop new skills and integrate interdisciplinary knowledge into the academic program. Alongside library development, I was involved in designing course modules on legal research and writing (LRW) and legal rhetoric and composition (LRC), as well as developing a course on law practice management (LPM).²¹ These courses allowed me to apply my growing knowledge of legal resources and research techniques to the curriculum, equipping students with practical skills they would need in both academic and professional settings.

The experience of building the law library from the ground up provided a unique interdisciplinary learning experience that blended library science with legal education. I began to understand how a well-curated collection and effective library instruction could shape the way law students approach research and analysis. This integration of library resources into the academic curriculum became a cornerstone of my approach, reinforcing the idea that the library is a vital part of the learning process, not merely a repository of information.

Key Lessons Learned:

1. **Adaptability and Lifelong Learning:** Without a background in library science, I had to learn on the job, constantly adapting to new challenges. The experience underscored the importance of lifelong learning as I continually sought out new information and resources to develop and improve the library.
2. **User-Centric Development:** Building the collection and designing the physical space with the primary users in mind was vital to the library's success.²² Understanding the specific needs of our users (both present and future) and their preferences guided decisions on everything from resource acquisition to spatial planning.
3. **The Power of Mentorship and Collaboration:** Having a mentor is like a lifesaver. Guidance from mentors and collaboration with colleagues were instrumental. Their insights and support made it

¹⁸ Sonam Wangdi and Kelly Tobden Dorji Tamang, "The Perspective of Library Management in Bhutan: Roles, Challenges and Opportunities," *International Information & Library Review* 55, no. 4 (2023): 302–31. doi: [10.1080/10572317.2023.2167052](https://doi.org/10.1080/10572317.2023.2167052).

¹⁹ Pema Choden, "The Role of Libraries in Developing Reading Culture: A Bhutanese Perspective," Thimphu: National Library of Bhutan, 2020.

²⁰ Roy Balleste, Sonia Luna-Lamas, and Lisa Smith-Butler, eds., *Law Librarianship in the Twenty-First Century*, 2nd ed. (Lanham, Maryland: Scarecrow Press, 2014).

²¹ Royal Institute of Law, "The Programme Advisory Committee Report" (Oct. 22, 2014).

²² Fitzgerald and Lee (n 9).

possible to navigate the unknowns of building a law library. Without their guidance, we would not have reached where we are today.

4. **Embracing Digital Resources:** Digital databases transformed the library's capacity to support comprehensive legal research.²³ Ensuring access to international resources expands the learning environment for students and faculty, bridging local and global perspectives in legal education, particularly filling the gap of limited legal resources in Bhutan.

CURRENT STATUS OF THE JSW LAW LIBRARY²⁴

Despite all the challenges, the JSW Law Library has been making strides towards modernizing its infrastructure. It aims to offer access to digital legal databases, fostering a hybrid model of traditional and digital resources. The JSW Law Library faces challenges typical of all Bhutanese libraries, including limited funding, limited legal resources, and a lack of trained librarians. However, the JSW Law Library remains committed to establishing itself as a pivotal resource in legal education in Bhutan and as a model for future academic libraries in the country.

Currently, the JSW Law Library is governed by the following documents:

1. JSW Law Library Strategic and Operational Plan 2023–2024;
2. JSW Law Library Policy;
3. JSW Law Library Program document;
4. Record Management Policy; and
5. Draft Archival policy.

Further, the JSW Law Library is a two-story, world-class, energy-efficient building with a seating capacity for four hundred users. With tremendous difficulty, the law library collected eight thousand physical items through purchases and generous donations. The library has six reading rooms, sixteen individual study carrels, one smart classroom, two conference rooms, one textile storage room, an archive room, an open lounge, and an open reading room. The library has eight library staff members who render library services to around two hundred users. The law library uses the KOHA integrated library system, an open-source library management system that is an excellent tool that all Bhutanese libraries use.

CONCLUSION

The establishment of the JSW School of Law Library was a complex but rewarding endeavor, rooted in the challenges of starting a library from scratch and compounded by my initial lack of formal library education. With strategic planning, a user-focused approach, and an emphasis on partnerships and digital resources, the law library has become a central part of Bhutan's first law school, supporting its academic mission and the development of legal professionals. This journey serves as a testament to the transformative power of education and the vital role of libraries in fostering legal education and preserving Bhutan's unique legal heritage.

²³ L. Johnson, "The evolving role of digital resources in law school libraries," *International Journal of Legal Information* 48, no. 1 (2020): 37–53.

²⁴ Jigme Singye Wangchuck School of Law, "Library," accessed Nov. 14, 2024, <https://jswlaw.bt/library/>.



Figures 1 and 2. Interior Views of the JSW Law Library. Photographs courtesy of Ugyen Thinley.